



**U.S. Department of Justice
Michael W. Cotter
United States Attorney
District of Montana**

NEWS RELEASE

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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MONTANA DEFENDANTS ARRAIGNED ON FEDERAL CHARGES OF ILLEGALLY TRAFFICKING IN EAGLE AND MIGRATORY BIRD REMAINS.

The United States Attorney's Office announced today, June 14, 2011, the arrests of WILLIAM E. HUGS, SR., WILLIAM E. HUGS, JR., and ERNIE LEMUEL STEWART, following the conclusion of "Operation Rolling Thunder", a multi-year investigation conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service into the illegal trafficking of eagle and migratory bird feathers and remains. These individuals were arraigned in a federal court session in Billings, on June 14, 2011, before U.S. Magistrate Judge Carolyn S. Ostby.

WILLIAM E. HUGS, SR., a 51-year-old resident of Crow Agency, appeared on charges of conspiracy to traffic in eagles and migratory birds, unlawfully trafficking in migratory birds, and four (4) counts of unlawfully trafficking in eagles in and around the Crow Indian Reservation. He is currently released on special conditions. If convicted of these charges, HUGS faces possible penalties of 5 years in prison, a \$250,000 fine and 3 years supervised release.

WILLIAM E. HUGS, JR., a 22-year-old resident of Crow Agency, appeared on charges of conspiracy to traffic in eagles and migratory birds, (2) counts of unlawfully trafficking in migratory birds, and two (2) counts of unlawfully trafficking in eagles in and around the Crow Indian Reservation. He is currently released on special conditions. If convicted of these charges, HUGS faces possible penalties of 5 years in prison, a \$250,000 fine and 3 years supervised.

ERNIE LEMUEL STEWART, a 33-year-old resident of Wyola, appeared on charges of unlawfully trafficking in eagles and migratory birds in and around the Crow Indian Reservation. He is currently released on special conditions. If convicted of these charges, STEWART faces possible penalties of 2 years in prison, a \$10,000 fine and 1 year supervised release.

The defendants pled not guilty to the charges.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Mark S. Smith and Assistant U.S. Attorney and Criminal Chief Kris McLean are the prosecutors for the United States.

The investigation, entitled "Operation Rolling Thunder", was conducted by agents from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Law Enforcement from March 2008 through February 2011. The focus of "Operation Rolling Thunder" was the unlawful trafficking in protected migratory birds, primarily Bald and Golden eagles. The Federal Statutes violated include the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the Lacey Act. The Bureau of Indian Affairs and the U.S. Marshals Service assisted in the arrests of these individuals.

"Bald and golden eagles face many threats in our country, including unlawful killing fueled by the illegal trade in their parts," said Steve Oberholtzer, Special Agent in Charge for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "These magnificent animals are important to the

American public for a variety of reasons, and we will investigate violations of the statutes that protect them to ensure they receive the protection they need to survive.”

“The defendants in this case are charged with killing and dismembering some of the nation’s most treasured raptors for mere monetary gain. It is one of the responsibilities of the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Montana to protect wildlife with such important connections to the cultural heritage of this nation and to the cultural and spiritual traditions of our Tribal neighbors. The efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Law Enforcement, and the federal prosecutors in my office are to be commended in this case.” said U.S. Attorney for the District of Montana Michael W. Cotter.

The charge, an indictment, information or complaint, is merely an accusation and all persons named as defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty. A pre-trial conference and a trial date will be set and the United States will be required to prove the allegations set forth in the indictment beyond a reasonable doubt.